

Showcomotion 2003: Children and young peoples' film festival screens more than 100 films

Part Two

Harvey Thompson
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Wallah Be (Kald mig bare Aksel), directed by Pia Bovi, 78 minutes, Denmark; *Whale Rider*, directed by Niki Caro, 104 minutes, New Zealand; *The Boy who wanted to be a Bear* (Drengen Der Ville Gore Det Umlige, directed by Jannik Hastrup, 75 minutes, Denmark/France

The Showcomotion film festival in Britain, now in its fifth year, was held July 4-13. The annual festival, based at the Showroom Cinema, Sheffield, presents a diverse range of films produced for young people that would not otherwise be screened in the UK. Priority is given to films representing the lives of children from around the world and addressing issues considered pertinent to younger audiences. This is the second part of a two-part review of some of the films shown.

Wallah Be, from Denmark, is about a nine-year-old boy called Aksel who wants to become a Muslim. In his neighbourhood, most of the older boys from Muslim families drive fast cars and wear trendy clothes. Aksel wants to be just like them.

During the school holidays, Aksel joins up with two girls, Fatima and Annika, in a singing competition. The three children befriend a stray dog. They compose a song and it becomes a hit down at the local supermarket. But Aksel's mind is elsewhere. Tempers fray. The group splits up.

In a series of often amusing scenarios, Aksel is introduced to the reality of becoming a practising Muslim. While eating his dinner, he realises that he is eating pork and has been for some time. With a bewildered look on his face and a mouthful of food, he tries to ascertain if, when his mother had previously said "meat," she really meant "pork." Later, when Aksel argues with his mother and older sister, they mockingly float round him with shawls on their heads and bow to him in jest.

Undeterred, Aksel succeeds in getting one of the older boys to take him to the local mosque, where he observes the traditional rituals. Still not satisfied, he visits the imam and asks him how he can become a "proper" Muslim. After establishing that Aksel is sure of his decision, the imam goes to see his reclusive father.

Fatima is grounded by her parents, who don't want her to enter the singing competition. The three children eventually reunite at the 11th hour and plot a way to make it to the competition final.

The film takes an unconventional look at a boy growing up in a culturally mixed environment. Like *Does God Play Football?*, *Wallah Be* highlights some of the absurdities of religion, which are magnified through their contact with young children. The film also brings out the inequality of treatment between boys and girls, with Fatima's experience counterposed to that of the Muslim boys whom Aksel seeks to befriend and emulate.

In places, the film loses its way, and a number of inconsistencies cannot be excused by an attempt to reach a younger audience. For example, the apparent contradiction of a group of teenagers and older youth praying at the mosque by day and joyriding by night is never explored or explained. On the whole, however, *Wallah Be* is a worthy attempt at a complex subject that will stir the interest of many youngsters.

From the other side of the world—and this time a story about a young girl—*Whale Rider* (from New Zealand) follows the life of Pai. Born into a traditional Maori family, Pai has her life set out from the moment of her birth. As she is born, her twin brother dies and so too does her mother. Pai's father is inconsolable, while Koro—Pai's grandfather and village elder, who is desperate for a male heir to succeed him—refuses to even look at her.

We pick up the story several years later. Pai's father has gone to work in Germany while her grandparents bring her up. Pai has grown into a young girl and adores her grandparents, but especially Koro. But while Koro has learnt to love her in return, he still maintains a cool detachment.

Pai's father returns and offers her the chance to go with him to Germany, where he now has a family, but she feels unable to leave.

Koro begins to train the local boys in the "old ways"—which consist chiefly of a type of martial arts, combined with a knowledge of ancient Maori custom and legend. Pai seems to excel in all of these, but is continually stopped from practising by Koro.

Then tragedy strikes. Some whales are washed up on the beach of the coastal village. With the help of the other villagers, Koro tries to pull the whales back into the sea. Pai believes she is responsible for summoning the whales with an ancient call when they had failed to respond to Koro. Koro is furious with Pai, but

the old man's real affection for her only become apparent when, seeking to undo the wrong she feels she's done, Pai disappears under the waves holding onto the lead whale's fin.

Based on a book by Witi Ihimaera, the story of *Whale Rider* is an earnest plea for tolerance and understanding. Through the characters of Pai and Koro, the audience sees not only the antagonism between two different generations, but also between two different eras.

Koro sees it as his life's work to pass on the thousand years of Maori culture and tradition. Included in this tradition is the story of Paikea, the original "whale rider," who is supposed to have led the first inhabitants from across the sea on the back of a whale to the site of the coastal New Zealand village. A wooden sculpture stands on the roof of Koro and Pai's house of Paikea on the back of a whale as a constant reminder of the family's forebears.

Pai, on the other hand seems destined to be rejected by Koro due to the laws of this same tradition despite repeatedly fulfilling its obligations—even her name seems to echo the legendary whale rider.

Notwithstanding the strict male-dominated Maori customs, we also see the more pragmatic side of the villagers. This is mainly conveyed through the character of Pai's grandmother, who helps bend the rules in Pai's favour and generally seeks to mollify Koro. She is quietly irreverent toward the "old ways," as evidenced by her playing cards and smoking with her friends while Koro is out.

Both grandparents are well-acted roles. But the most emotionally and physically demanding part, that of Pai, is wonderfully played by the young Keisha Castle-Hughes. Her performance has helped *Whale Rider* to win wide acclaim, such as the 2002 People's Choice at the Toronto International Film Festival, the 2003 Audience Award at the Rotterdam Film Festival and the 2003 Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival.

The Boy who wanted to be a Bear brings to the screen a familiar character in children's picture books—the polar bear (a German animation *The Little Polar Bear* [*Der Kleine Eisbar*] is also included in the festival).

A polar bear gives birth to a cub that dies, leaving the mother distraught. In desperation, the cub's father steals a newborn boy from an Inuit's house. The boy's father vows to find him, while his mother is heartbroken. The boy is raised lovingly as a bear and soon believes he is a real bear cub. The Inuit father eventually captures and brings back the boy, killing the mother bear and almost killing his own son in the process.

Although the viewer sees and feels the Inuit mother's grief and later the parent's frustration when trying to tame their "wild" captured son, the story is told very much from the viewpoint of the bears. References to mankind are generally of a fearful character. In the opening scene, as the pregnant mother bear prepares to give birth, the father bear reassures her that they are in a safe place away from the terrible "harpoons of mankind." Almost simultaneously, as the Inuit father holds aloft his newborn son, he proclaims to his sleigh-dogs that a "great hunter" is born. Later, as the desperate father bear carries the infant boy to the grieving mother bear, a raven warns him that if he doesn't return the boy, he will be hunted to the "end of the world." The bear replies that he would do that anyway.

We are invited to feel sympathy for the plight of the bears, but we do also see their strength and ferocity when fighting off hungry wolves or ripping open a freshly captured seal.

As in *Whale Rider*, there is an interesting exploration of myth and legend at the heart of the story. After his bear mother dies, the boy hears her voice telling him to seek out the "Spirit of the Fell," as only it can help him. This is a variant of a fairy-tale that the boy's real mother also tells him. The boy seeks out the spirit and asks it how he can become a real bear, to which the spirit replies that he must pass three tests of great strength, endurance and solitude. If he is still alive at the end of them, he will become a bear. The boy fulfills the three tasks with the aid of some arctic animals who, bound by "ancient law," are obliged to help "he who is brave and attempts the impossible."

This optimistic message will not be lost on most children, nor will its exploration of the relationship between man and animals. This complex area is afforded an ambiguity that will encourage children to think about these issues for themselves. Another element of the film is its serious attempt to introduce young children to the notion that someone's environment influences the kind of person he or she becomes.

The animation has been kept simple, except on a few occasions such as the extraordinary sequence in which we actually look through the eyes of the father bear as it approaches and enters the Inuit house. The simplicity of the enchanting snow scenes and the haunting melody contribute to make this an enjoyable story that resonates for some time.

Also worthy of note at this year's Showcomotion were a collection of interesting animated works. In *Angry Kid* (Darren Walsh/UK/2003/1 minute), the team behind the Aardman classics demonstrates what can happen when a child gets really angry outside your window—not for snail lovers! *Uncle* (Adam Elliot/Australia/1996/6 minutes) is the brief biography of an eccentric, practical, yet simple man who is badgered by religious salesmen. *Trainspotter* (Neville Ashley and Jeff Hewitt/UK/1996/5 minutes) is an amusing look at a curious British obsession—featuring anoraks, engine numbers and plenty of rain. *A Bout Du Monde* (Konstantin Bronzit/France/1998/7 minutes) is a hilariously clever, Oscar-nominated tale of a house balanced on top of a hill.

On display at Showcomotion 2003 was the enormous potential of the highly imaginative world of children's films. Free from many of the constraints of conventional films, there is often a greater sense of "anything" being possible. And although this is not always evident—with many films at the festival following more tried and tested formulaic patterns—many filmmakers show an encouraging readiness to experiment, explore new territory, and above all, take their young audiences seriously.

Concluded



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